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ABSTRACT

This paper identifies the factors that can make a building principal an effective instructional leader, as seen from the superintendent's perspective. According to the author, the effective instructional leader helps those in the educational community define instructional goals and objectives, works to develop effectiveness in teaching, builds a productive educational organization, creates a climate for teacher growth and leadership, and provides adequate resources for teaching. The most important aspect of the principal's leadership role is teacher supervision, which may conflict with his or her role as a teacher evaluator. The author urges collaboration with teachers to develop a three-phase instructional improvement cycle to guarantee the feedback both parties need for supervision and evaluation to be compatible. Evaluation conferences must then be planned and conducted carefully to maintain the trust that has been established. The author concludes his discussion of the principal's role by listing a number of personnel management concepts he believes instructional leaders should understand. (PGD)

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IMPROVING THE PRINCIPAL'S PERFORMANCE AS AN INSTRUCTIONAL LEADER

by

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Most of us have a vague notion of what we think an instructional leader should be. Yet were we to compare those notions, we would probably find considerable variation among us. An that is as it should be. If you check a dictionary, you won't find "instructional leader" listed there. There are no pat definitions.

How a principal perceives his/her role as an instructional leader will depend on two things. First, his personal notions about the role and second what he thinks his "boss" expects. So if a superintendent wants to influence the performance of principals as instructional leaders, the superintendent will have to communicate clearly what he/she expects of people in such roles.

What you expect of instructional leaders is for you to decide. The essential thing is that you make that decision consciously, and that you communicate your expectations clearly. While I am not in your shoes, I want to share some of my ideas about instructional leadership in the hope that they might be useful to you as you examine your own.

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Let me begin by sharing my view about what an effective instructional leader does.[1]

1. An effective instructional leader helps people in the school and community define their instructional goals and objectives. If we are not clear about what we expect as outcomes of the instructional process, we are not likely to gain much control over what students achieve or don't achieve. So, if I were a superintendent, I would insist that my principals work with their teachers to identify clear, observable objectives for instruction. And I would insist that these objectives appropriately reflect the instructional goals of the school district.

2. An effective instructional leader aims to develop effectiveness in teaching. I think lots of principals think they work hard at being instructional leaders, but if you analyze what they do with their time, you see other priorities getting in the way. For example, a principal can spend most of the time taking care of the building and grounds, dealing with details of paper work, scheduling, and so forth. So if I were a superintendent, I would want my principals to know that their role as an instructional leader was a priority. They would know that I cared about that aspect of their job. They would see clear indicators of what I meant by that in their job descriptions. And they would see those indicators again when I evaluated their performance.

3. An effective instructional leader builds a productive organicational unit. I think the principal who see the outcomes of instruction as the essential function of the school is going to also see that every person in that school building works toward that essential aim.

Positions all complement that purpose. So if I were a superintendent, I would want my principals to train all their staff members, secretaries, cafateria workers, attendance clerks -- whoever -- in how their roles complement the main purpose of that school. And I would want my principal to help employees in school -- teachers, counselors, everybody -- understand how their individual roles fit in with everybody else's roles. And I would want my principal to model good communications kills and effective human relations skills. I would probably want to role model those skills myself as well as provide principals with inservice training in this area.

4. An effective instructional leader creates a climate for teacher growth and leadership. I think a principal who works with teachers rather than thinks he has to "tell" them everything is going to have a more effective instructional program. The principal who views teachers as "professionals" will reflect that view in the way he works with his teachers. For one thing, he won't violate instructional time. He won't interrupt teachers during classroom instruction unless an emergency occurs. Furthermore, he will insist that teachers employ appropriate professional behaviors when they work with kids and parents while he can't hold teachers fully accountable for whether kids learn, he can insist on accountability in how they teach. As a superintendent, I would be continually looking for ways to help my principals see advantages in trusting the professional judgments of teachers, in sharing leadership responsibilities with them, in involving them in planning and implementation decisions. And again, I would model this behavior as I worked with the principals themselves.

5. An effective instructional leader provides adequate resources for teaching. An instructional leader knows that it takes both time and things to make a first class program. I would want my principals to encourage teachers to plan and work tohether, and to make time available for that. I would also want my principals to leave no stone unturned in efforts to provide the "things" teachers need to work with students. And little things can make such a difference. Recently, in my own department where we have 3 ditto machines, all three were "borken" on the first day of the semester. Nobody could get class materials ready! There is no reason for these things to happen. An effective instructional leader anticipates, and well as reacts.

The more explicit you can make your expectations, the more likely principals will be able to please you. A way to clarify expectations, of course, is to use them as the basis for job descriptions and for evaluating job performance. So once you decide what you want an "instructional leader" to do in your school, I encourage you to follow through on that commitment. You are familiar with this process and you know that it works. There are many aids to assist you in defining what you want. Nearly every book you pick up on "instructional leadership" is going to have a list of two of behaviors that are associated with effective instructional leadership. But there are no recipies. You have to bite the bullet and make the decision for yourself.

I think that if there is one aspect of instructional leadership more crucial than all others, it would be supervision. I realize that many people see a conflict in a principal's role as a supervisor of teachers and his role as an evaluator of teachers. I acknowledge that conflict exists. It is

difficult to place yourself in a helping relationship one day and then to have to be an evaluator and judge the next. But there is no way out of that conflict. The principal cannot afford to give up either role. So as a superintendent, I would want my principals to recognize the crucial importance of their supervision role and to use the best possible supervision model to help teachers improve teaching performance.

If the supervisory process is not effective in a school, very little systematic improvement of instruction is likely to occur. HOW one sets about to work on improving teaching is just as important as WHAT one set out to achieve.

There are many types of instructional supervisors. You have probably seen them all. There is the person who stays in the front office and at the end of the year provides a report to the teacher, that describes the teachers' strengths and weaknesses. The principal is apparently guided by divine inspiration in this process. (One teacher recently told me that her principal's "divine inspiration" was to give all teachers "3's on a 5-point evaluation scale <u>because</u> he had to justify in writing ratings above or below that mediam point!)

There is the principal who pops into teachers' classrooms for a few minutes and bases judgments of teaching performance on what they see and hear during that time. And there is the principal who knows more about teaching than the teachers, and tries to take over their job with endless nit-picking suggestions for "how to do it." None of these models of supervisory behavior is desirable, because none of them work very well.

A more desirable approach is for the principal to collaborate with the teacher in determining what is to be improved, how such improvement might come about and what evidence will be used as proof that progress is made. We will call this approach Instructional Improvement Cycle.

The Instructional Improvement Cycle contains three phases – a planning phase, an assessment phase, and an improvement phase. The cycle is based upon communication and shared decision making between the principal and his/her faculty and individual teachers. The critical element in the cycle is FEEDBACK because that brings the teacher and principal together to share information and concerns about improving the instructional process.

The purpose of the planning phase is for TEACHER and PRINCIPAL to reach explicit agreements about why the teacher is going to be supervised and how the principal intends to do it. Any aim to improve instructional effectiveness must be focused if it is to be useful. Both teacher and principal must agree that some problem needs to be worked on (and a problem does not necessarily imply a weakness -- it can be a desire to become better at something one is already good at doing). They must agree on what the teacher will do (that is, how he/she will attempt to improve performance related to the problem), what the principal will do (that is, what he will look for and how the data will be recorded), and why all this is taking place in the first place. It is a "This is what you will do, that is what I will do, and here's why" time.

This before the fact contract is important. Sometimes principals supervise ritualistically -- "My job is to supervise, your job is to be supervised, today's the day, let's get it over with." Or sometimes their supervisory efforts become basically a social process, rather than to aim for specific outcomes "When it is

a tea party or a wrestling match, it is not supervision."[2]

Once the objectives of the supervision are made clear, then the procedures to be employed need to be established. THE SUPERVISOR OBSERVES TO SEE WHAT IS HAPPENING SO THAT HE CAN TALK ABOUT IT WITH THE TEACHER AFTERWARD.[3] So the principal needs as accurate a record of what was observed as possible. This can be done any number of ways. The principal can record what happens or use tape or video recorders. She can use instrument -- there are dozens available or you can design your own. The important thing is to describe observable behaviors. A principal can't have a very productive interaction with a teacher about needed improvements if he has to discuss his "feelings" or "beliefs" about what happened. Teacher and principal need a common base of imformation for sharing ideas. The teacher needs to know what behaviors are going to be used as "evidence".

In the Assessment Phase, the observation is made and data are recorded. There are a couple of reasons why the principal should actually observe the teacher in the classroom. A disengaged observer can see things the teacher can't see. By adding eyes, the principal increases the data. Another reason is that the principal needs to demonstrate to the teacher that he believes improving instructional effectiveness is serious and justifies paying close attention to what teachers do in their classrooms. Also by putting himself in close proximity to the teacher and the pupils at the very moment that problems in professional practice occur, the principal is in a better position to be of real assistance to the teacher.

The next thing the principal does is analyze or make sense out of the observational data. And then he plans a strategy for managing the feedback conference. At this point, he issues to treat, what data to cite, what goals

to aim for, how to begin, where to end, and who should do what.

The way the conference is conducted is of utmost importance. Unfortunately, many teachers expect super-vision to be punitive. Teachers' anxieties and mistrust of supervision, their expectations of punishment, can be alleviated if they learn that supervision is an essentially rational process. The analytical component of supervision is intended to make it SAFER. If, as a supervisor, I show you the recognizable evidence that has led me to certain questions or judgments about what you have done, and if I have described the reasoning I followed in reaching my judgments about your teaching effectiveness, then I have made it possible for you to discover logical inconsistencies in my reasoning and to offer alternative interpretations. In other words, it gives the teacher a degree of control over his/her own destiny and allows common perceptions to be shared in acknowledging that a problem may exist.

Planning a strategy for the conference has several purposes:

1. It is intended to improve efficiency. A planned approach to reaching goals through deliberate processes is more likely to work than a random one.

2. It is intended to enhance protection. Evaluation judgments are improtant to most teachers. They are usually highly concerned about their performance. Given the assumption that the conference may emotionally charged, it follows that the conduct of such business ought to be carefully considered in advance. Furthermore, there is a practical concern here. If the teacher feels damaged by the process, the principal's role as helper and collaborator in the future is destroyed. That is self-defeating for the principal and the school system.

3. It is intended to provide continuity in supervision, to allow for longitudinal development of one kind or another. Many goals for improving instruction may need to be long range, thus supervision needs to have a fabric, a cohesiveness, a unity that only carefully thought out strategy can provide.

4. It is intended to enhance a teacher's confidence in supervision. If the principal is perceived as working hard to prepare for the conference the teacher's belief that the principal's primary aim is to assist her will increase. The strategy of a conference should demonstrate that the principal has a strong commitment to improving instructional practice; that he is not simply verbalizing concern.

All roads lead to the conference. Until the conference is held, the teacher has been in the vulnerable position while the principal has been practically invulnerable. The teacher has performed, the principal has only watched. The teacher's mistakes may be apparent to the principal, but the principal's perceptual errors and errors of interpretation are invisible. The principal is in the position of having nothing to lose, while the teacher can be thoroughly undermined by the supervision process.

The teacher's first real opportunity to move from behind the eight ball is during the conference. The principal can no longer play a closed hand. The teacher has a right to review the data, to offer interpretations, to provide additional input. And the principal has a responsibility to mind, while at the same time remaining properly assertive in his/her insistence that performance be improved.

If I were a superintendent, I would want my principals to realize that the conference is intended to:

1. leave the teacher with something concrete to work toward, namely a plan for improving instructional practice
2. redefine the supervisor contract -- to decide what directions supervision should take and why
3. provide a source of adult rewards
4. encourage and train the teacher in the techniques of self-assessment and evaluation.

You can believe that if I were in your shoes, my number one priority in inservicing my principals would be to teach them how to use a supervisory process that had the elements I have jsut described. Probably nothing else I could do would yield greater gains in terms of my principals' instructional leadership skills.

Finally, as superintendents you each have some pet notions about what makes for better instructional programs. The top administration in a school district needs to make clear the underlying assumption and premises they want to guide the improvement of instruction in the district. It is amazing how the beliefs and values you communicate get picked up and reflected by others in your district. That is both the power and the responsibility of your role.

Again, I am not in your shoes, but if I were I would want my principals to know that I believe an effective instructional leader realize that:

1. Improving instructional effectiveness involves evaluating Teaching, Teachers, Curriculum, and Programs
2. Human beings perform best when they know what is expected of them and are rewarded appropriately for those behaviors

3. Motivation is intensified when employer and employees know each other well, are open in their communications, and treat one another decently, responsibly, and with affection
4. You do not have to be an expert at teaching a subject or grade level to be helpful and effective in a supervisory role
5. Positive feedback is more powerful than negative feedback
6. Teachers should be involved in deciding on how instructional improvement will occur and how processes will affect them personally and individually
7. Many sources of data and many different processes can be useful for improving instruction
8. Teachers must be treated as professionals and expected to demonstrate responsible professional behaviors
9. There is a role conflict between a principal's job to improve instruction and his/her job to evaluate teachers but this cannot excuse the principal from the responsibilities of either task; effective principals wear both hats equally well
10. Improving instruction takes time

Those are my notions. Yours will be different and perhaps better. But whatever they are, the essence of improving a principal's performance as an instructional leader is to make clear what you expect. Perhaps you want to collaborate with your principals in defining these expectations. That's an excellent way to go. But whatever is decided, there needs to be commitment

and consistence. And your inservice program for principals needs to focus on improving skills in those clearly defined areas.

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1. Edward F. LeRoche, An Administrator's Guide for Evaluating Programs and and Personnel, Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 1981, p.111.

2. Robert Goldhammer, Clinical Supervision, New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1969, p. 63-64.

3. Ibid, p. 64.